

U.S. Senate OKs wilderness bill

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The U.S. Senate unanimously gave approval Tuesday evening to a bipartisan bill that will expand wilderness areas in both the Green Mountain and White Mountain national forests.

The bill, co-sponsored by U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., as well as New Hampshire's two Republican senators, Judd Gregg and John Sununu, now will go to the House, where it could face action as early as next week.

According to the New England Wilderness Act of 2006, the wilderness areas in the 400,000 acre Green Mountain National Forest would almost double, from 59,000 acres to a total of 107,000 acres, or a quarter of the national forest.

"The many public meetings and thousands of letters, e-mails and calls from Vermonters indicate broad support for this step," Leahy said in a joint statement with Jeffords.

Jeffords noted that "designating additional wilderness now is in keeping with the wishes of so many Vermonters."

Sanders' spokesman Erin Campbell said Sanders and New Hampshire's two Republican House members also fully support the bill.

"I strongly support the bipartisan New England Wilderness Act, which will help preserve Vermont's wilderness for future generations," Sanders said in his statement.

The new wilderness areas will include a new Glastenbury Mountain wilderness area, covering 28,900 acres in the Bennington County town. It also establishes the Joseph Battell Wilderness Area — 12,300 acres in all — in Addison County.

It also expands some of the forest's existing wilderness areas: Breadloaf, Peru Peak, Lye Brook and Big Branch — the last three in Bennington County.

The bill also establishes a new 16,000-acre Moosalamoo National Recreation Area, which is not as restrictive as wilderness designation.

Wilderness designation bans any motorized recreation or logging, while the national recreation area would allow such activities such as snowmobiling.

The New England Wilderness Act of 2006 adds more wilderness designation than suggested by the staff of the Green Mountain National Forest, which had completed an extensive revision of its management plan for the forest earlier this year.

"Wilderness provides the highest-quality water, creates the quietest and most natural environments for wildlife and people, and supplies the kinds of natural amenities that help local economies flourish," said James Northup, executive director of Forest Watch, one of the 14 environmental groups that formed the Vermont Wilderness Association to promote additional wilderness.

On the other side of the debate is the Vermont Forest Products Association, which opposes additional wilderness designation, saying that too much of the forest is off-limits to logging, affecting the state's wood products businesses.